**A Doll’s House – By Henrik Ibsen,**

**Brooklyn – By John Crowley,**

**The Handmaid’s Tale – By Margaret Atwood**

**How theme is introduced**

**Brooklyn:**

At the beginning of the text Rose’s actions begin to establish the identity of women in the world of the text, namely that they are confined and in difficult living experiences and therefore must actively seek to better their living experience. This is seen early on as it is made clear that Eilis has to move away to improve her lot; at present the protagonist is shown as dependent on her sister, and hence it is implied that she must move away so as to become independent.

The film directions indicate Eilis’ difficult situation at present, as she is forced to arise and go to work at a time when others are afforded the luxury of rest: “It’s morning, but it’s still dark. One of the front doors opens, and out slips EILIS – early twenties, open-faced pretty without knowing it. She closes the door quietly behind her and walks quickly up the street.” Such stage directions immediately suggest Eilis’ difficult lot, confirmed as Rose is knowledgeable of her sister’s awkward regular routine. Rose has taken it upon herself to make breakfast for Eilis, showing not just knowledge of but also care for her sister, but also confirming that at present her sister is dependent on her and needs to move away to not just enjoy a better living situation but also to gain independence, rather than remaining in the shadow of her sister, even if this is beneficial: “There is a hissed call from behind her. She turns, and her sister ROSE – thirty, attractive, slender, plane – is running after her, in nightdress and bare feet, holding out a piece of bread and jam. Eilis takes it from her, makes a face to show how grateful she is.”

**Handmaid’s Tale:**

Early in the novel the protagonist reveals the true extent of adversity facing her and others, as those who control her and other handmaids in the world of the text have gone to great lengths to ensure control and superiority; this, in turn, represents the inability of the narrator to form an independent identity, as escape and freedom necessary to achieve this is not possible, but rather one that is specifically removed in different ways to ensure it cannot be enjoyed at all.

The narrator’s description of different kinds of freedom represents how those who control her go to great lengths to ensure she cannot escape their influence and form her own identity freely and without being impacted by others: “It isn’t running away they’re afraid of. We wouldn’t get far. It’s those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge.” The quote indicates how there is not a general control of the narrator and others but coordinated and specific attempts to ensure freedom cannot be enjoyed but also that it becomes an impossibility. The narrator presents various efforts to bring this about, a metaphor for the inability to naturally form an identity that is created by those around her in charge of her world: “I know why there is no glass, in front of the watercolour picture of blue irises, and why the window opens only partly and why the glass in it is shatter-proof.”

**Doll’s House:**

The opening of the text reveals how women are ultimately accepting of their relegated identity in relationships, as a result of the patriarchal world of the text. Nora has recently attained a loan for her husband and thus proven her worth in the marriage, yet is still unwilling to recognize or accept this as evidence or justification for a greater lot in the relationship, showing how those affected by the detrimental actions of the opposite sex are willing to accept such a lowly identity despite their worth.

Nora attained the secret loan to assist her husband in the time of need, when he was ill, however this creates a dichotomy of sorts. On one hand, her doing so symbolizes her inner strength and worth to the marriage: she has stepped up and safeguarded her family at a deeply difficult time, which contravenes the female stereotypical identity of passive and dependent on the husband. However, it also challenges societal traditions and conventions, whereby females were not supposed to assume such influential identities and accept the superiority of their partners, as this would challenge the patriarchy whereby the man took charge of all matters in the household. Nora is more affected by the latter, lamenting that her loan could affect her husband if it became public knowledge, as it would ridicule his supposed position as patriarch: “How painful and humiliating it would be for Torvald, with his manly independence, to know that he owed me anything!” Her comment is telling as it completely ignores her worth to the family, subscribing to the patriarchy as it focuses solely on the man’s situation and wellbeing, as he was central to the household. Nora is merely concerned with ensuring Helmer retains his reputation in society, which can come about if she retains the identity of obedient wife in the relationship.

**Definition/ presentation of theme**

**Brooklyn:**

**Handmaid’s Tale:**

As the text progresses, Eilis soon realises the need to escape her current situation, as said earlier; she must leave Ireland and all she knows, where she is expected to follow a routine stipulated by others, so as to embrace independence and form her own identity. This is also, poignantly, realised by her sister, who sees that she must let her sister go, despite not wanting to, so as for Eilis to grow.

Rose’s admitting fault in seeing how few possessions her sister has as she packs represents how she has contributed to the role now possessed by Eilis: ‘Is that really everything you own? Oh, Eilis. I should have looked after you better. I should have taken you shopping twice a year, summer and winter.” Such a comment, however, contributes to her sister’s role as it controls her living experience and prevents Eilis from forming her own identity, which the protagonist recognizes, as she tells her sister that she has already done enough for her: “You’ve bought most of the clothes in this case. That’s one of the reasons I’m going, because I can’t buy my own.” Rose, in response, appears to recognize that there is a limit on how much she can care for Eilis, which perhaps she has been ignoring due to the pain of such realization, and admits supporting the plan of emigration because it will allow her sister to escape from the role that Rose has, albeit unknowingly, contributed to creating: “If it was just that, I’d spend every penny I had on you, gladly. But I can’t buy you a future. I can’t buy you the kind of life you need.”

**Doll’s House:**

As the drama continues Helmer reinforces the identity of the relegated woman in relationships in Norwegian society. Nora introduced the identity of the woman not having influence or any say in the relationship so as for the male to assume dominance; Helmer now seizes this opportunity offered to him by her passivity, illustrating the dynamic of the patriarchy and how it contributes to the creation of this identity.

The patriarchy, as said, depends on the relegated woman in relationships. Her acceptance of this position, already shown with Nora’s guilt over taking the secret loan, thus creates an opportunity for the male to reinforce the aforementioned identity and assume control over all affairs in the household, including those affecting his wife. Helmer’s dominance of his partner is therefore not just significant for his actions, but also as this reinforces Nora’s contribution to such coming about. This is seen when the villain declares his wife should not handle money matters, forbidding Nora from indulging in financial issues: “That is like a woman... you know what I think about that. No debt, no borrowing.” The comment is on one level a source of dramatic irony, as the audience is aware of Nora’s secret actions, however this underscores how the female has caused her own relegation by accepting male dominance in the relationship and her resulting identity: the protagonist had the opportunity to use the loan to recognize and create an alternative identity but chose not to, which gave her husband the opportunity to thus reinforce his control of the marital union.

**Characters who contribute to the theme**

**Brooklyn:**

The growing relationship of Eilis and Tony reinforces the identity of women in the next, namely that they have to continue progressing and evolving their living experience actively for such identity to form. This echoes the progression of the protagonist from earlier, where she was shown as needing to leave her sister to grow independent and create her own identity, which is continued here.

When Tony and Eilis walk home from the dance Tony reveals that he wouldn’t take Eilis to an Italian dance, suggesting that it would not be a suitable place for a woman due to the inappropriate actions of the men there: “I wouldn’t want to take you to one. They behave like Italians al night... Hands.” Such a comment presents Tony as beginning to reach out to Eilis to form a relationship, which naturally involves considering Eilis in his living experience and thus offering her a relevant identity, here with a desire for her not to endure what he believes would be a troubling situation for her. She does likewise later, seen as she begins to expand her worldview so as to include Tony, which thus expands her identity to include another, such as on their next date, when she longs to learn more about him, even if it is only to hear him to speak about what he believes to be base and limited topics: “You know enough about plumbing already... I don’t know anything.” Elsewhere, when Tony is worried she hasn’t eaten anything while he has finished his meal, Eilis seeks to immediately quell any fears, making it clear she is enjoying herself regardless, so as to further the connection and ensure he is incorporated into her life: “I’m wood you haven’t eaten anything... (smiling) Too busy talking.” This shows Eilis as similar to Tony, expanding and evolving her living experience, here with a romantic partner, which reinforces the aforementioned role of women, which is of an active individual who must constantly strive to better their situation.

**Handmaid’s Tale:**

Some individuals in the text do not focus on the difficulty facing the handmaids in their attempt to form and embrace their own identity, but rather consider what they believe to be positives of these women’s situation. This represents an alternative to the view of the narrator mentioned earlier and potentially indicates a reasoning for the dominance of those controlling the world, as those who could challenge them, connections of the likes of the narrator, are not concerned with such action.

Aunt Lydia and Gilead illustrate such a viewpoint when they choose to focus on various freedoms they believe women to enjoy, in turn ignoring the freedoms these women have lost, such as the ability to form their own identity: “There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it.” Their argument is that the women of Gilead should focus on what they have rather than that which they have lost, such as no longer experiencing sexism from strangers; while this is true, it does link back to what was mentioned earlier about the narrator and other handmaid’s inability to form identity, namely that freedom is focused on in a variety of ways by the controllers of the world so as to prevent this from being enjoyed at all. It can be argued that the women’s focus on some of these freedoms is an acknowledgment and support of the efforts of such controllers, as it contributes to the difficulty of the narrator and others to escape their oppression and create identity themselves, rather than assisting in such efforts.

**Doll’s House:**

Mrs. Linde is one character who accepts the relegated identity of women in relationships, and her actions seek to maintain such a limited living experience. She does not seek out authentic emotional connection through the relationships she enters, and rather presents herself as wholly dependent on the male, a depressing position which the patriarchal society demands of its female members.

The woman’s revelation that she only married her husband due to financial difficulties is telling, as it marks her as similar to other women in her world: “My mother was alive then, and was bedridden and helpless, and I had to provide for my two younger brothers; so I did not think I was justified in refusing his offer.” Her contentment to accept financial assistance reminds us of how Nora will not assume the opportunity from attaining the loan to create an alternative and preferable identity for herself: the woman willingly accepts constraints in return for salvation from debt, entering into a marriage where the male will dictate conditions, which thus appears as a loan of a different kind. Even later, when there is opportunity to forge a more conventional relationship, Mrs. Linde instead focuses on what the male can offer her, rather than entering the relationship as an independent being who can retain some control through self-identity. She focuses largely on the loneliness she will escape from with Krogstad’s presence, immediately recreating a relationship where the female is dependent on the male, thus foreshadowing further gender hierarchy in the future: “Nils, how would it be if we two shipwrecked people could join forces?... Two on the same piece of wreckage would stand a better chance than each of their own.”

**Characters’ various responses to the theme**

**Brooklyn:**

At times characters show a longing to return to previous identities before they were able to experience a newfound and improved version of this, due to extreme isolation, caused by circumstances such as emigration and hence lengthy distances between the individual and those who they care for. While poignant and at times heart-breaking, this is a reminder that new experiences, while sometimes beneficial and useful, often do not mask over the struggles of the individual.

Eilis’ reaction to Rose’s letter sent soon after her emigration shows the protagonist’s desire to remain connected to those in Ireland and her previous identity but underlying realization that this is not possible due to the significant distance involved, represented emphatically by the newfound and indirect means of communication. This explains her uncontrollable weeping when reading the letter, as she realizes she can only hear of such events at home rather than experience them first-hand with those closest to her: “The big news here is that since you left, Mummy has stopped shopping at Nettles Kelly’s.” Such is all the more obvious considering the subject matter appears quite basic and mundane, which represents that which the protagonist longs to experience firsthand, but is aware that they cannot.

**Handmaid’s Tale:**

The narrator and other handmaids focus on responding to and challenging the opposition to self-identity in atypical forms, so as to maintain hope that they eventually, one day, enjoy this on a more emphatic level. On one level this can be seen to represent the attempt of the narrator and others to never give up hope in the quest for freedom.

In the seventeenth chapter the narrator describes how she and other handmaids steal butter and make use of it in a ritualistic challenge to the adversity they face by those who control them: “As long as we do this, butter our skin to keep it soft, we can believe that we will some day get out, that we will be touched again, in love or desire.” The symbolism of such a ritual is obvious, as the lathering of the butter presents a cleansing of the control of others, so as to maintain innocence and avoid the corruptive presence of the controlling parties in the world, which will, hopefully, allow them to easily form identities of their own when the opportunity arises. The indication is that avoiding such corruption is necessary as otherwise it will be impossible to eventually return to the previous state of freedom and independence, and as said form identity. The narrator therefore metaphorically presents she and the other handmaids as enjoying such rituals away from those controlling them, creating a divide that is necessary if they are eventually to escape their current adversity: “We have ceremonies of our own, private ones.”

**Doll’s House:**

Nora, as protagonist, unsurprisingly presents the most forceful opposition to the relegated identity of women in relationships. She is eventually willing to reject all aspects of her life to escape such a depressing existence, realizing the only possible means of departing the patriarchy is to sever all ties with this space, which will in turn allow her to create a new identity for herself.

Nora’s departure from Helmer is not surprising, considering his abuse of her over a prolonged period. Her abandonment of their children is somewhat of an initial shock as the protagonist plans an abrupt departure from the home: however Nora realizes the only possible means of escaping the patriarch’s control in the marriage is to remove herself from any possible avenue in which he can exploit her and consolidate the identity he has created for her, which illustrates the male’s desire for control in the marital union and how influential this can be if executed effectively. Nora recognizes this occurring as Helmer seeks to emotionally blackmail her by suggesting a retention of the family unit, symbolized by the reference to husband and wife as brother and sister, arguably a stronger blood connection so as to force the female to remain aligned to her identity of passive and accepting of his rule: “No, Nora, no; I can’t grasp the thought... But can we not live here, as brother and sister?” The protagonist recognizes this, and her decision to reject her children radically emphasizes how her husband will not be successful in his latest attempt to keep control of her, as this is the only other possible way he could possibly blackmail her in this form, as she has rejected him: “You know very well that wouldn’t last long. Good-bye Torvald. No, I won’t go to the children. I know they are in better hands than mine. As I now am, I can be nothing to them.”

**Key moment 1**

**Brooklyn:**

Eilis’ meal with Jim in the Connaught Hotel is significant as while she is with her other love interest the dynamic follows the same basic premise as her connection with Tony; while interacting and learning more about each other she is primarily concerned with incorporating the other into their living experience, showing a deliberate desire to expand her identity.

The film directions make it clear that Jim cares about Eilis having a good time at their meal, but also that Eilis is aware of such and hence that she makes an immediate effort to connect with him: “Jim is wearing a blazer, and he’s nervous. Eilis recognizes his nerves and his vulnerability, and she’s grateful for them.” Whereas it is Jim who does all the talking as opposed to when it was Eilis doing so with Tony, earlier, at the heart of the connection is a focus on the other. Jim, despite talking, halts himself to return to ensure Eilis is enjoying herself, showing his incorporation of another as part of his emerging identity: “I’m sorry. I wanted to ask you a thousand things and all I’ve done is talked.” Similar to earlier, Eilis realizes his care for her and in doing so shows concern for him, here appeasing Jim that she is having a good time: “I’m glad... Really?... Yes.” The symmetry to Eilis’ connection with Tony, shown earlier, not only represents the fundamentals of relationships in the film but also again how the protagonist is embracing the identity of women, to actively seek to improve their situation through a variety of means, such as connecting with others, as seen here.

**Handmaid’s Tale:**

The description of the Center brainwashing Moira in the twenty-second chapter reveals how a desire for self-identity, despite being longed for by the narrator and other handmaids, will be difficult to realize; their desire for freedom and independence to achieve this is shown as countered by the ability of the Center to remove such will and wanting so as to ensure control of all handmaids.

Moira’s ability to begin to influence the women represents how adversity is difficult to escape, as their desire and will to enjoy freedom, previously shown as great, takes little time to slowly fade and weaken: “Moira was like an elevator with open sides. She made us dizzy. Already we were losing the taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls secure.” The repetition of “Already” sums up what was just mentioned, how such a great desire to escape adversity is quickly undone, represented further by the narrator who hence presents herself as slowly disintegrating, a metaphorical reminder of how her entire worldview was based on achieving freedom to create her own identity up until this point: “In the upper reaches of the atmosphere you’d come apart, you’d vaporize, there would be no pressure holding you together.”

**Doll’s House:**

Torvald’s presentation of himself as Nora’s savior reveals how males’ commitment to the patriarchy and the resulting relegated identity of women in relationships: such is his prolonged belief in his superiority that he believes it to be the truth, revealing how the relegated position of women is caused by those who actually believe in such an identity, rather than doing so for purely corrupt reasons.

Helmer arrogantly announces himself as protector of his wife, suggesting he has longed for her to fall into danger so he can prove her identity, as inferior to and thus dependent on him: “Do you know that I’ve often wished you were facing some terrible dangers so that I could risk life and limb, risk everything, for your sake?” The repetition of “risk” is particularly telling and exposes the falsity of such a statement, as the patriarch’s primary priority is to consolidate power in relationships through creation of such an aforementioned identity, confirming he would most likely not act in such a manner. However this appears to be more influenced by his arrogant belief in superiority rather than the construction of a deliberate lie; indeed it can said that a prolonged period of dominance has created such a mindset, and can be matched to his wife who has accepted her relegated identity in marriage to such an extent that it now becomes part of her subconscious, seen earlier in the dream scene. Such an example confirms how the patriarchy may affect each gender differently, but that males and females respond to it similarly in their acceptance of the resulting identities that form.

**Resolution**

**Brooklyn:**

The ending of the film sees Eilis return to Brooklyn and reunite with Tony. The film directions represent the benefits of embracing the identity of the woman, to continue improving their lot by such means as incorporating another into their living experience, namely the romantic partner, which is especially evident as such occurs as both individuals have spent a prolonged period apart.

Eilis’ closing voice over, which begins when talking to the girl on the ship during her return journey to America, details the difficulties of emigration, how “You’ll feel so homesick that you’ll want to die, and there’s nothing you can do about it apart from endure it.” Such a comment represents the difficulties she has faced during the plot and how she would be justified to be focused on herself during such turbulent periods. However, her closing lines detail how “one day the sun will come out... And you’ll realize that this is where your life is.” Such a comment symbolizes the upturn of mood and emotion that have come about through embracing her identity as active individual intent on improving her living experience; significantly, these final lines are spoken as the two embrace. The film directions make it clear that Eilis is still caring and considering of Tony until the last, as significantly he is unsure how she will react to him and that it is her initial embrace, indicative of her active role, that returns them to their strong connection. This indicates that there will be an upturn in fortune that can come about through connection with others but that these will only be successful and offer such joy if one considers the other in the bond, as was shown as occurring as Eilis sought actively to improve her lot through forming a relationship with her beloved: “Tony sees her. He stops in his tracks, smiles broadly, runs across the road. For a moment he’s worried about the reception he’s getting. Eilis’ expression is difficult to read, and for a moment he looks at her anxiously, but she opens her arms to him. Freeze on their embrace.”

**Handmaid’s Tale:**

Near the close of the text, the narrator reveals how being with Nick has had the effect of removing her desire to escape and create her own identity. Her inability to find love and experience independence is a bleak reminder of how the powers that be in her world dissect freedom into various elements so as to ensure she cannot form her own identity, and hence that such influence is still impossible for the narrator to realize at the close.

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The narrator speaks of Nick, detailing how “The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here with Nick, where I can get at him.” Such a comment is significant as it indicates the narrator’s belief that freedom to form her own identity is not possible, and therefore there is a focus on making her confined experience that is life somewhat less of an ordeal than it was previously. The suggestion in the second sentence, where the narrator mentions “where I can get at” Nick suggests she will direct her defiance and opposition at some other target now, bleakly indicating that the relationship will not be typically romantic but rather somewhat beneficial in another way, as she can focus her frustrations on some other rather than the controllers of her living experience who prevent her forming her own identity.

**Doll’s House:**

Nora’s attack on her husband, focused on his mistreatment of her, is significant as she focuses in on his true character. This is a symbolic reversal of the treatment she has received in the marriage, when she was wrongly reduced to a mere stereotypical identity earlier, such as when accused of not being able to handle money when it was her loan that saved her husband in a time of need: “When your terror was over - not for what threatened me, but for yourself - when there was nothing more to fear - then it seemed to you as though nothing had happened. I was your lark again, your doll, just as before - whom you would take twice as much care of in future, because she was so weak and fragile.” Her focus on Helmer’s nature destroys the façade of identity which held their marriage together, with the introduction of the truth necessary so as to inform her husband of the reasons for her departure and why she will no longer remain in his control. Her doing so leads to an emphatic conclusion that she has nothing to stay for, justifying her departure as she will not remain for a husband she has no care for, who forms an identity for her that is not factual or warranted: “What do you consider my most sacred duties?... your duties to your husband, your children... I have other duties just as sacred... Duties to myself.”